

Table of Contents

Page

Introduction.....

Form of Government.....

Pattern of Ministry

Power & Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The Church as it Was Meant to be

Periodically, in the history of the church the cry has sounded to reform and cleanse the church, and to return it to the purity and simplicity of the apostolic era. While taking care not to overly idealize the first generation of Christians (after all, the church at Corinth was a branch of the early church!), we have grown to appreciate the appeal of such a return. What vitality was present in the apostolic church! What energy, what boldness, what progress, what success! Thus, we have come to share the desire of countless reformers, including Bernard, Francis, Wycliff, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and the Pentecostals, to duplicate the apostolic ministry today.

The problem with these reform movements is that they have tended to isolate and emphasize one element of the whole program of the church, and in so doing, forfeit the apostolic balance which was the key to its success. For example, some have said the key to apostolicity (and revival) is the Holy Spirit and have preached the work of the Spirit with great effect. But without the apostolic balance of doctrine and government, they have been vulnerable to the bizarre and cultic, to Jonestown and Baker\Swaggart. Others have emphasized the apostolic priority of doctrine and teaching while neglecting the work of the Spirit. This has led to dead orthodoxy and legalism. Others have made similar mistakes.

We have been able to find four key elements in the apostolic church which constitute apostolicity and form the basis for their success. Along the outline below, we have found what it means to be apostolic. Here are the keys to revival.

Form of Government - How was the early church organized?

We start here because this is the element most likely to be overlooked. It has become commonplace to say that Scripture teaches no particular form of church government. Government was established on an *ad hoc* or pragmatic basis, it is said. Whatever worked best at a given time in a given place was allowable, so long as it promoted peace and purity in the church. But, does this view fit the evidence of our primary source of information about the early church, that is, the New Testament? We think not. Arguing to the contrary, Douglas Bannerman, in his *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church*, has said, “So far at least as regards this primary office of the eldership, the organization of the Church of Christ was not a matter to be left to chance, or to develop itself on different lines, according to circumstances and the predilections of the first converts in each locality” (532). We think that he is right, and we think that the evidence of both Scripture and early church history indicates that the form of government established by the apostles was close to that which we today call Presbyterianism.

1. The churches were governed by elders assisted by deacons. Clearly, God did not drop a *Book of Church Order* out of heaven into the hands of the church. Jesus did not leave a system of organization for the church. Nevertheless, over a period of time a system was revealed. Not everything was revealed at once. Some irregularities and inconsistencies in the practice of the infant church are evident in the early chapters of Acts. But, by the middle of Acts it is apparent that apostolic authority will terminate with the apostles, that “Elders” (plural) will be appointed “in every city” (Titus 1:5) and “in every church” (Acts 14:23), and that the deacons

first appointed to assist the apostles will thereafter assist the elders. With the passing of the apostles, the churches were to be governed by councils of elders who were chosen by the people.

Let us elaborate. First, **Christ appointed apostles** for the foundational period of the church to govern and rule the church. The Apostles (with a capital “A”) were men who had been i) appointed by Jesus Himself; ii) with Christ “beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up”; and iii) witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 1:22). There were twelve of them, plus Paul, who is an exception in nearly every respect (he even calls himself “one untimely born” - 1 Corinthians 15:8), except that he was an eyewitness of Christ (“Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord” - 1 Corinthians 9:1). They had **unique authority** with the ability to command churches and require their obedience, as is clear in the frequent use of the imperative in the epistles. They had **unique gifts** of miracles, of “signs and wonders” (Acts 5:12), called “signs of a true apostle” by Paul (2 Corinthians 12:12). They also had **no successors**. They formed the “foundation,” but not the superstructure (Ephesians 2:20). “A succession in the apostleship,” says New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, “was not envisaged” (*New Testament History*, 210).

Second, **the apostles were assisted by deacons**. This is clear from Acts 6 and requires little comment. The widows of the early church required attention. The Twelve say, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.” What is the solution?

But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may

put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:3,4)

The result? “The whole congregation . . . chose” (Acts 6:5). Deacons were selected by the people and ordained through the laying on of hands by the apostles (6:7). Their duty was to serve (to “deacon” means to serve) the material needs of the congregation, ranging we may surmise from care of facilities to feeding the needy, to assisting the sick.

Third, **the apostles were succeeded by elders.** We read,

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

“Elders” (plural) were “appointed” or “elected.” Thus, i) rule was corporate and ii) the elders were elected by the people.

Regarding (ii), the question may be raised, did they actually elect their leaders? “Elect” may be an overstatement, but it does seem clear that the people participated in the *selection* of their leaders. The word “had appointed,” found in Acts 14:23, is the Greek word, *cheirotoneo* (*cheir* = hand; *teino* = stretch out), meaning literally, “to raise one’s hand.” It can mean elect, appoint, choose, and can indicate either “elect by raising hands” (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:19), or appoint or install directly (cf. Acts 10:41). Alexander argues that the verb denotes what Paul and Barnabas did in ordaining or appointing the elders and does not determine “the mode of election or the form of ordination” (whether appointment or election). He goes on to say, however, “*that the use of this particular expression, which originally signified the vote of an*

assembly (my emphasis), does suffice to justify us in supposing that the method of selection was the same as that recorded in 6:5,6 where it is explicitly recorded that the people chose the seven and the twelve ordained them” (II, 65). Similarly, Longnecker says, “Here in the Galatian cities the initiative was taken by the apostles in the appointment of elders, but probably with the concurrence of the congregations (cf. 6:2-6; 13:2,3; 15:3-30)” (439). The precise relation of the people’s choosing and the apostles’ appointing is probably impossible to determine. But, with the coming absence of apostles in succeeding generations, the principle seems clear enough - the people shall participate in the choosing of their leaders.

Regarding (i), it seems clearer yet that the ongoing work of pastoral care, discipline, teaching, and worship were to be the responsibility of councils of elders, not individuals exercising apostolic-type authority. T.M. Lindsay, in his *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, summarizes the evidence from the First Century saying, “There is no trace of one man, one pastor, at the head of any community” (155). Nothing can be found like the Episcopal or Baptist models of today. Can this be demonstrated? Yes. A consistent pattern was established in the lifetime of the apostles. As we have seen, elders (plural) were appointed or elected in all the churches (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5ff); nowhere do we find solitary authority. But don’t we find bishops in the Bible, too? Yes, and no. Yes, they are in Scripture, and no, they are not there as an office distinct from that of elder (presbyter). Elders were called both bishops (*episcopoi*) and pastors (*poimante*) in the New Testament. “Elder” refers to the office they held, “bishop,” or “overseer” and pastor, refers to their function. For example, Paul sent for the “elders” of Ephesus and in his address to them said “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (bishops) to

shepherd (pastor) the church of God” (Acts 20:17,28). In Titus, Paul charges Timothy to “appoint elders” and then says, “for the overseer must...” (Titus 1:5,7). Peter exhorts the elders and charges them to act as pastors (“shepherd”) and bishops (“exercising oversight”) (1 Peter 5:1,2; cf 1 Timothy 3:1ff & 5:17-19). The word “bishop,” argues Lindsay, “is not, during the first century, the technical term of an office-bearer; it is rather the word which describes what the office-bearer, i.e., the elder, does” (165). Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate, declared as late as the Fourth Century that in the apostolic age elders and bishops were the same and, according to Lindsay, “this idea may almost be said to have prevailed throughout the Middle Ages down to the council of Trent” (mid-1500's), when, for the first time, the *institutio divina* of episcopacy became the general doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and later, of the Episcopal Church as well (p. 164).

Documents from early church history confirm the above view. The *Epistle of Clement*, dated about 95 A.D., uses the terms elder and bishop interchangeably just as the New Testament does, attributing oversight to the presbyters. From the 2nd Century, the *Didache* refers to a college of office-bearers who are called “overseers and deacons.” The *Apostolic Canons* indicate the presence of one bishop or pastor, a session of elders and a body of deacons, but, as Lindsay points out, “the elders rule over the bishop as they rule the congregation, and the bishop is not their president” (171). In the *Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* one finds a bishop, elders and deacons constituting the governing body of the church. His writings are the first to clearly advocate a threefold order of ministry, including a strong “bishop” who would be responsible for the administration of the sacraments, worship, and doctrine. But the bishop is still complimented by a session of elders; his

authority did not extend beyond his own congregation (there was no diocese; it was one bishop per church); and he was not responsible for discipline. Thus, in each of the above documents one finds a plurality of leaders.

Sometimes it is claimed that episcopacy was universal by the middle of the Second Century. This may be true, but only in the highly qualified sense described above. The critical question is not what terminology was used, but what was the reality behind the labels? What kind of episcopacy was it? The “bishop,” when distinguished from the other elders in the Second Century, functioned originally like a pastor among the elders. Every indication is that while the seed of later episcopacy is present, the early church form of government more closely approximates that of present-day Presbyterianism. It was, in other words, a representative form of government where pastors were both under the elders and distinguished from them.

Summarizing the sources from the First Century describing the Apostolic form of government, Lindsay says,

They prove to us that before the close of the first century bodies of presbyters existed as ruling colleges in Christian congregations over a great part of the Roman Empire. The *Epistle of Clement* proves this for the Roman Church. The First Epistle of Peter proves it for Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. The Apocalypse confirms the proof for Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The Acts of the Apostles adds its confirmation for Ephesus and Jerusalem (p. 163).

Even at the end of the Third Century it can be demonstrated that “every Christian community had at its head a single president who is almost always called the bishop,” says Lindsay, who “presided over the session of elders, over the body of deacons, and over the congregation,” while being subject to the session’s authority (204). Still, Lindsay likens this to Presbyterians “in the present day.” Thus, while the terminology becomes confused, the functions of bishops and elders closely resembles that of teaching elders and ruling elders in the Reformed churches. It is no wonder that it was this model the Reformers were self-consciously reviving.

2. The churches were bound together by a common government. In spite of the popularity of independency, we should not miss the principle of mutual dependency and submission among the churches. We find evidence of this in Acts 8:14ff when the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to investigate the work in Samaria; Acts 13:1-3 and 14:27 as missionaries are sent out by the Antioch church and then return to report. But our primary text is Acts 15 and the appeal made by the Antioch church to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem. They met in council and rendered a decision that was binding upon the churches. The basic question to ask is, how could it have been if the churches were autonomous congregations? The council on that model could only have made recommendations or suggestions that the independent congregations would have been free to follow or not to follow. But this is surely not the self-understanding of the early church. They understood their action to be authoritative and binding upon the churches. The following features bring this out.

First, **the appeal from Antioch** - what were they doing if not asking a higher body to rule on a dispute which they could not resolve? Where did they get the idea of making this appeal? Isn’t

the implication that they understood their congregations were not autonomous and there was a system of appeal in place, however primitive and undeveloped? If one were to argue that the council was only called at the request of the Antioch church and, therefore, had no authority beyond that granted it by that church, then one, in effect, destroys the necessity of such a council. Could a minority at Antioch have requested the council's action? If not, if, in other words, the council exists only at the whim of the majority at Antioch or any given church, then the council is redundant. The majority in a given church could always enact its own decrees and ignore both its minority and the decision of any council which rules contrary to the majority. The council becomes unnecessary except as a means of buttressing the position of an already dominant majority. It seems more reasonable to assume that both minorities and majorities at local churches could appeal to higher councils whose decisions could then be imposed upon that church and all the churches. The appeal to Jerusalem and the apostles indicates both a connectional church and the authority of higher church courts over lower courts.

Second, **the composition of the Council** - several factors indicate that this was a *representative council*. i) The Antioch church sent its representatives; Paul and Barnabas "and certain others of them" were sent (v. 2). ii) Elders were involved. We read of the "apostles and elders" (vv. 6, 23) deciding the issue. Why not just apostles? We surmise that it was for the sake of the future generations. Elders were involved because it was through elders that the ongoing life of the church would be governed. Once the apostles died, elders, as elected representatives of the people, would compose the councils. iii) The apostles were involved, and thus it was a *catholic* or universal council. The basis upon which the decree of the council could be imposed upon the church was not

apostolic authority. The decree was enacted by the apostles *and* elders. But, since not all the churches sent representatives, it was based on apostolic *catholicity*. Thus, *each* church directly involved was represented, and *all* the churches were represented through the apostles. Marshall says, “at this stage the Jerusalem church still felt possessed of authority to tell other churches what to do, no doubt because it was led by apostles” (254). In the persons of the apostles the whole church was represented and present at the council. Therefore, what it decided could be imposed on all the churches. Notice, there is no mention of bishops. As we saw above, when it is the office of the one functioning as a bishop or overseer that is being mentioned, he is called an elder. There is no episcopal authority in the early church.

Third, **its claims** - how does the council refer to its decision? It renders a “judgment” (from *krino*, to judge, decide; v. 19). It writes a letter which gives instructions. It sends representatives to communicate that letter. It endeavors not to place too great a burden upon the Gentiles, but it does indeed “lay upon” them a burden (v. 29). In 16:4 the decisions are called *dogmata*, “decrees” that had been “decided” or judged (again *krino*, to judge, decide; also used in 21:25 of the decisions of the council). John Dick, in his *Lectures on The Acts of the Apostles* (1845), said the use of *dogmata* signifies “that it was not merely advice, or a simple declaration of their judgment, but an authoritative decision, to which the disciples were bound to submit, if they would remain in the fellowship of the church” (222). The churches were to “observe” this decision. This is the language of authority with every expectation that the decision would be followed and had become law for the churches (as James indicates in 21:25).

Fourth, **its jurisdiction** - word is sent to Antioch, but also to the churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:23) and Galatia (16:4). The authority of the decisions is recognized in Asia (Revelation 2:14,20), and extrabiblical evidence indicates its application in churches in Gaul. Longenecker argues on the basis of 15:19, 21:25, and 16:4 that the application of the council's decision was not limited to the few areas mentioned but extended "to Gentile believers generally" (451). Likewise, Marshall says, "The authority of the apostolic council was regarded as binding on churches outside Jerusalem" (260). Though the decisions were not addressed to other churches, they were applied to them.

So, we find in Acts a connectional church. John Dick summarized the evidence in Acts saying,

. . . the Church in the apostolic age, was not broken down into small parts, detached and independent, but was united, not only by love and a common profession, but by *the external bond of a general government* (217, my emphasis).

Let us now summarize. When considering the government of the church, there are three basic options derived from scripture. 1) The *hierarchical* model, such as the Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist, and some Lutheran churches. In these, authority flows from the top down, from the bishops to the priests or ministers to the people; 2) the *democratic* model, as in the Baptist, Congregational and most independent churches, where authority flows from the bottom up through the democratic process, and each congregation is regarded as autonomous; 3) the *representative* model, as in Presbyterian churches, where elders are elected who then exercise rule, where the churches are governed by local councils of elders (sessions and consistories), but where groups of

churches also are governed by higher councils or Presbyteries and General Assemblies.

Returning to the argument that there is no prescribed form of government in the Bible, does it fit the evidence? It seems to us that God gave to the church not only a body of doctrine and a system of ethics but a government as well. That government is conciliar. It is also connectional. We see here the seeds of the representative or presbyterian form of church government. No modern denomination can claim to be exhaustively “apostolic” in its form, but some are more true to the apostolic form than others. A system that is representative rather than hierarchical, conciliar rather than autocratic, and connectional rather than independent, is one which most accurately builds upon the apostolic principles.

Why is this important? Because this is the most efficient, just, and peaceful way for the church to determine its direction, its principles, its practices, its priorities, and to resolve its differences. Lose balance in one direction and you end up with tyranny. Lose balance in the other direction and you have anarchy. Of course, the Spirit must animate the form. But the form itself is God-given and important. Perhaps this is Luke’s point in concluding his account of the Jerusalem Council’s work saying,

So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 16:5)

Having taken us through the debate and the decision, and told us of the communication of the decision, the net result is that “the churches were being strengthened in the faith” (there was qualitative growth), “and were increasing in numbers daily,” (there

was quantitative growth). When we handle problems correctly, the ministry of the church need not be disrupted. As E. F. Harrison pointed out, through the decision of the council 1) the gospel of grace was protected; 2) the unity of the church was preserved; 3) the mission of the church was enabled to proceed; and 4) the churches were encouraged. This was no mean accomplishment and, at least to some degree, exemplary of what can happen when we govern the church as God has ordained we should.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian religion in our day is about to self-destruct because of the abandonment of these principles. How so? Because there are too many ministers and churches that are accountable to no one. As difficult as it is to work with and work on sessions and boards, many, many authoritarian preachers need just that. Our hero-worshiping culture elevates talented men to heights that mortal flesh cannot bear. One need not be surprised when sexual indiscretions and financial mismanagement follow. Power corrupts. Those who answer to no one inevitably experience the warping of their priorities and personalities, and do the unanswerable. Since this is not an infrequent phenomenon in our day, and since almost daily clerical scandals occur, the collective impact of which is all but ruining the Christian witness in our generation, is it not time to restore the principle of rule by a plurality of elders rather than rule by preacher/priestly autocrats?

On the other hand, if we do find emerging in the New Testament a presiding elder (such as James in Acts 15:13ff and 21:18ff) or teaching elder (distinguished from the ruling elder in 1 Timothy 5:17) would not a Biblically sound form of government deliver the church from what some have called “the scourge of independency”? Independency over time renders a people

ungovernable and results in anarchy. Congregations tear themselves apart for generations because of the pride of independence, of answering to no one. Submission is not learned in relation to the Session, Presbytery, or denomination. Deference is not given to the elders, minister or one another. Factions form. Battles are fought. The ministry suffers and sometimes collapses.

Elders are to be given “double honor” (1 Timothy 5:17). Leaders (Greek - *hegoumenoi*) are to be obeyed and submitted to (Hebrews 13:17). They “have charge over” the congregation which is to “appreciate” and “esteem” them (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Is this not the very thing which is needed to counteract the spirit of anarchy so prevalent today?

If one belongs to an independent congregation one ought to do one’s utmost to bind the church to the denomination insofar as is possible within the limits of the church’s constitution. For generations the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah has sought to build bridges with the Presbytery wherever it could. Its ministers are members of Presbytery. Its doctrinal standards are those of Westminster. Its local government closely resembles that of the *Book of Church Order*. Much of its benevolence money goes to denominational causes. In fact, for years the church advertised the fact “all its beneficent offerings are distributed” through the General Assembly. The ties are strong and should grow stronger yet. When new churches are planted by an “independent” Presbyterian church, they should be launched with the intention of seeing them become members of Presbytery. In these ways the tradition of independence is honored and yet the Biblical principle of common government is obeyed.

Yet again, the apostolic form will deliver us from the hierarchical tyranny experience in many sectors of the church. Unelected denominational bureaucrats lord it over lowly congregations, most recently threatening, in a notorious example, to force unsought ministers on congregations. Though this defied congregational rights unchallenged for four hundred years, it seems not to matter one wit. Personal and political agendas are pursued without regard to local interests. Is not the republicanism of the early church the answer to ecclesiastical oppression?

Polity is not irrelevant. Ministry and government cannot be separated. The road to revival begins with the restoration of the Biblical form of church government. Representative and connectional church government provides the “checks and balances” necessary to keep the church on track and protect it from anarchy on the one side and tyranny on the other.

Pattern of Ministry - What Did the Early Church Do?

So far, we have seen the form within which the ministry of the church is to take place. It is representative and connectional. Now we look at the kind of ministry itself. What did they do? This is a crucial question in our day because of the crisis of confidence in the ordinary elements of ministry. More and more churches are resorting to what until recently would have been called gimmicks and entertainment. What Os Guinness has called the “therapeutic” and “managerial” revolutions have overtaken the church. The traditional preaching has been replaced by “talks” that aim to be “relevant” and “helpful.” Biblical structures have collapsed before the wisdom of Wall Street and Madison Avenue. The church is led by “managers” and “executives” who “market” and adapt the church for various “consumers.” In stark contrast to these current developments, we notice in the early church the absence of the complexity of modern church life. There is no elaborate program

of ministry. There seem to be no specialized groups within the church. Rather, the church concentrates on a few essential things. What are they? Luke tells us early on,

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)

Where are the programs? Where is the hype? There is none. **The early church was committed to the ordinary means of grace.** By “means of grace” we mean the primary means by which the grace of God in Christ reaches people. *The Shorter Catechism* wisely identifies the “outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption” as “the word, sacraments, and prayer” (Q. 88). If we add to this “fellowship,” which is a result of the other three elements, we have exactly the priorities seen in Acts. We may look at them in order.

1. They built their ministry on “the Apostles’ teaching.”

They were committed to the word of God, especially the preaching of the word of God. The early church was deeply committed to evangelism. Much of Acts is summaries of evangelistic sermons. All of them, without exception, are rich expositions of Biblical themes. The evangelism of the early church was didactic (teaching) evangelism. Likewise, the devotion of the early church to instruction of the Scriptures is noted regularly. It is in the aftermath of the mass conversions of Pentecost, we are told that “they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching” (2:42). Indeed, evangelism and teaching merge in Acts, the one leading to the other. Though warned by the magistrates to “speak no more in the name of Jesus,” we read instead,

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (Acts 5:42)

As important as attending to the physical needs of the widows is, the apostles say,

And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." (Acts 6:2)

And again,

"But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:4)

In Thessalonica, we find that for three days Paul "reasoned with them from the scriptures." He was "explaining" and "giving evidence" of the Christ. Some were "persuaded" (17:2-4). The Bereans are commended as "noble minded" because

. . . they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

At Athens he was "reasoning in the synagogue" (17:17). At Corinth,

. . . he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. (Acts 18:4)

At Cenchrea, he "entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews" (18:19).

At Ephesus,

. . . he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (Acts 19:8)

When forced to withdraw from the synagogue at Ephesus, he began meeting in “the school of Tyrannus,” “reasoning daily,” probably from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., typically the time of the midday rest for most schools. For five hours a day, six days a week, one hundred and twenty hours a month he taught, with very fruitful results:

And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:10)

The hunger of the people for the word of God is illustrated by Paul’s ministry in Macedonia found in Acts 20. At Troas, he preached from sundown until midnight (20:7). After this session of 4-6 hours, the young man Eutychus fell from the window, died, and was then raised from the dead. Did everyone say enough is enough and go home, having learned from that close call? No! They stayed, and Paul “talked with them a long while, until daybreak” (20:11). They could not get enough. They were hungry for the word of God. Paul taught them right through the night!

Perhaps we may select as a summary of the apostolic commitment to the word of God Paul’s famed claim in his charge to the Ephesian elders:

Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. (Acts 20:26,27)

The whole “purpose” (*boule*) of God indicates the “counsel” or “plan” of God. It is the word used in Acts 2:23 and 4:28 and Ephesians 1:11 of the eternal purposes of God. It has in mind all that God has revealed about Himself. His task as a minister of the Gospel is to all of God’s truth - *all* of it.

A church that wishes to be apostolic will give prominence to preaching, and will preach the whole truth. This is vital if the revival of apostolic ministry and power is to come.

We are committed to exposition preaching for this very reason. We preach verse-by-verse, through whole books of the Bible. Why? So that the whole counsel of God is certain to be taught. Otherwise, the preacher and people are tempted to select pet themes each week and avoid the harder topics. Our messages are determined by the next text, whatever it might be. We also give time for preaching. Ten to twenty minute sermons will never feed the people of God adequately. As John Stott said, sermonettes breed Christianettes. Slowly, methodically, and systematically we work our way through the whole Bible, wherein is found in the whole Christ, the knowledge of whom, alone, can make us whole.

Yet, some well meaning folks yearn for the preaching of nothing but the “simple gospel.” While this can be meant in a perfectly valid sense, what usually is in mind is evangelistic sermons. They want to hear sermons that apply to someone else, to the unsaved. They want preaching that never goes beyond the call to belief in Christ for salvation. Week after week in literally tens of thousands

of churches in America you can hear this kind of preaching morning and night. No teaching goes on at all, just evangelistic messages. Nothing is said about sanctification, or adoption, or perseverance. Nothing is said about the nature of the church and its sacraments. Never is there an exposition of the Ten Commandments. Of course nothing is said about the decrees of God and predestination. The doctrine of the Trinity, the attributes of God, the dual nature of Christ, the meaning of Ephesians, or Romans, or Genesis are never explained. It's just the simple gospel, every time.

Why don't we do that? Because the Bible forbids it. The writer to the Hebrews, in the context of teaching about Melchizedek (no less) complains,

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14 NIV)

You are "slow to learn" he says. You ought to know enough to be teachers. But instead, you still have to be taught the "elementary truths of God's word." "You need milk, not solid food," he complains.

Further he says,

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (Hebrews 6:1,2)

He says that the “elementary teaching about the Christ” are to be left behind. He counts among those “elementary” teachings the doctrines of “repentance from dead works,” “faith toward God,” and “washings,” “the laying on of hands,” “the resurrection of the dead,” and “eternal judgment.” These things, which by our standards are weighty indeed, he calls the *elementary* subjects. These are the fundamental and basic things that we are to leave behind. We are commanded to leave them behind. We cannot stick to the elementals. God forbids it!

This is a tremendous problem in the churches today and, as much as anything, reveals our lack of apostolicity. Many people have been fed “milk” all their lives, and consequently they are weak and sickly. It doesn’t work with spiritual development anymore than it does with physical development. Can you feed a human being only milk all his life? Our baby thrived on it for a while, but not now, and certainly not when she is ten or twenty years old. Yet Christians live all their Christian lives on spiritual milk. He says they should be teachers by now, but they’re not. What they need is meat. Granted that as soon as you give them meat they may complain. They may say that they can’t take it, that it’s “heavy,” that they don’t understand. “This is not the ‘simple gospel’ that I grew up with,” they may claim. Precisely. We have a responsibility to get beyond the simple, the elementary, and “press on to maturity.”

Neither can we stop with the “practical.” Above all things, modern people are pragmatic. They want to know what will work. They want something they can apply to their lives. Now, again, this is not necessarily a wrong desire. We are convinced that all of God’s truth is practical in that it has practical implications that are important. The doctrine of the Trinity along with the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ have played a vital role in restraining the powers of the civil government. I don’t think that there is any question about it. When one thinks long and hard about God’s truth, it all has practical applications. This is not what we are talking about. What we’re talking about is an outgrowth of the narcissistic culture we live in. It is a perverse preoccupation with self that demands teaching that immediately solves all of one’s personal problems. That is what is happening now in the churches. People want their problems solved and they want them solved *now*. Thus, the preaching of the cross has been replaced by marriage counseling, financial advice, and pop-psychology. Expository preaching has been usurped by topical preaching and psycho-babble. The doctrine of God has been replaced by talks helping yuppies deal with stress. Yes, Paul preaches what is “profitable” (v. 20). But do you think that he means that part of the Bible is unprofitable? Or does he mean that he taught it all because it is all profitable? Remember, he says he preached night and day for three years (v. 31). If that means he preached the equivalent of two sermons a day for three years, he did as much preaching as most ministers do in 18 years. He did teach it all, not just that which was superficially practical. He was able to dig deeply into the theological and philosophical roots of the Christian faith.

Still others demand something “positive.” This is the other obsession. People want something nice said to them on Sunday

morning. They want to leave the church uplifted and encouraged. They want to feel good about themselves and life. Avoid talk of sin and judgment, they say. These things are negative. No, since Paul preaches the “whole counsel of God” he calls his listeners to “behold the goodness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22). The whole counsel of God means both “goodness” and “severity” are preached, taught, and believed. One cannot be “free from the blood” of all men and also avoid the harsher truths of the wrath of God and hell. Our souls need the whole truth.

An apostolic church is a preaching church. This is not an age that needs more music or discussion or drama. It needs more preaching. Revival for the church will only come with the revival of preaching.

2. They gave prominence to the ordinances of worship, including the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism. They were “continually devoting themselves to . . . the breaking of bread and to prayer” (2:42). Though there is some debate about this, in the context of what Longenecker calls “two such religiously loaded terms as ‘fellowship’ and ‘prayer’” (290), the phrase “the breaking of bread” surely has paschal significance and indicates, says F.F. Bruce, “the regular observance of the Lord’s Supper” (79). “This,” says Marshall, “is Luke’s term for what Paul calls the Lord’s Supper” (83), and not just an ordinary meal. Similarly, we read in Acts 20:7 that the church gathered on “the first day of the week” (notice -- it was already observing Sunday worship), “to break bread” which, according to Longenecker, “must surely mean to celebrate the Lord’s Supper” (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34; p 509). The phrasing implies that this is what they did each week. When they met they observed the Lord’s Supper. It was a regular

part of their worship, or at least we can say that it very quickly became such in the early church.

“Prayer” is literally a plural noun preceded by a definite article - “the prayers.” These “suggest formal prayers,” says Longenecker (290). Bruce sees the term as indicating “appointed seasons for united prayer within the new community” (80). It could be that the four elements of v. 42 should be seen, not just as characteristics of the early church generally, but as characteristics of each of their gatherings or of their times of worship. Whatever the precise nuance of this term, their devotion to the elements of worship, including the sacrament and prayer. We read further in v. 46,

*And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple,
and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking
their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.
(Acts 2:46)*

“Day by day” means “daily.” They went to the temple every day. What were Christians doing at the temple? They were there to worship. Remember, they were in the transition period. They had a new faith but still practiced the old ways. It was natural for them to go to the temple to pray (cf. 3:1). The outer court of the temple was a huge place, and it may be that they had large gatherings there. We don’t know what exactly is meant, but they were clearly “continually devoting themselves” to worship.

What about baptism? That was already mentioned in Acts 2:38. Those who would be saved must repent and be baptized. This is consistently the pattern in Acts. Indeed, salvation and baptism are so closely associated that one could almost mistake them for a requirement for salvation, as indeed some of the sects have.

Ananias told Paul, “Arise, and be baptized, *and wash away your sins*” (Acts 22:16). “Baptism now *saves* you,” Peter says (1 Peter 3:21). It is the initiatory rite of the church, and all who are saved ordinarily will receive it and the blessing that accompanies it (cf. Acts 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47,48; 18:8; 19:5; Hebrews 10:22).

So the early church emphasized worship and sacraments. Yet this points out a great irony to us. Where do we see this same emphasis today?

Worship is our “ultimate priority,” as John MacArthur entitled his book. Our first duty is worship. Jesus said the Father “seeks” worshipers. This does not mean He merely seeks attenders at what passes for worship services. We are to “offer to God an acceptable service with *reverence and awe*” (Hebrews 12:28). “Through Him then,” the writer to the Hebrews continues, “let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Hebrews 13:15).

The church ought to cultivate such at both its formal and informal services. Reverence is not a matter of style so much as spirit. Wherever and whenever one meets for worship, that worship should be reverent. That is our ambition. Yet we find few joining us in this endeavor. The near fatal weakness of the church today is the almost complete absence of reverent worship. A.W. Tozer called it the “Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church.” During our family devotions in recent weeks the thought has been recurring to me that there is something not quite believable about our “worship” at home. We sing a lot, pray, and read the Bible, but the note of reverence and awe is missing. I am not convinced that the children really believe that we are dealing with God. So, in the last week we have begun kneeling for our prayers. Bodily

submission makes the point that slouching prayers do not. We are praying *to God*.

Paul said of the church at Corinth that the unbelieving onlooker would be “convicted” and “called to account” by all he saw, have the “secrets of his heart” “disclosed,” and would “fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1 Corinthians 14:24,25). Nothing of the sort could possibly happen in most of the worship services of today. The unbeliever would not “fall on his face” because no one else had been moved likewise, either metaphorically or actually. Our services are upbeat and happy. We provide a song and a dance. We want to meet your needs and entertain you. It’s no wonder that unbelievers who visit don’t find it quite believable. Are these people dealing with the God of the Bible? They couldn’t be. If they were, there would be an unmistakable sense of reverence, fear, and awe. We will be a much more credible church, with a much more powerful witness, when people see that we are serious about God, not treating Him as a personal errand boy.

3. The early church was committed to prayer. Whatever the implication of “the prayers” in 2:42, the word being used to denote worship is “prayer.” Worship was a time of prayer. Their commitment to prayer is unambiguous in 1:14 - “These all . . . were continually devoting themselves to prayer . . .” Pentecost, we can be sure, was born in a prayer meeting. Each major event, each major advance in not just Acts but Luke’s Gospel is preceded by prayer. As they pray, the Spirit descends again, fills and emboldens them (4:31). As they pray “fervently,” Peter is released from prison “by an angel” (12:5ff). As they pray, Paul and Barnabas are set apart for missionary service (13:2). Notice three characteristics of

their prayer. 1) Their prayer was continuous; 2) It was corporate; 3) The church leadership was present.

The church should be committed to having regular meetings for prayer. We have weekly meetings for men and women and quarterly meetings for the whole congregation. Yet, I am still convinced that for the most part we toy with prayer. We pray a few times and give up. We call a congregational prayer meeting and 15 of 600 members attend. Of these, only a handful will be officers. How does one grow a church? Is it a matter of good ministers, good programs, lots of activity, nice facilities? These are the things we rely on in this country, but the first church had none of these things. Neither did the Korean church of the end of last century.

The apostolic church gathered for prayer. It was not just one or two individuals praying in isolation. They were all together in prayer. “These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer.” The officers were present. The women were present. The whole congregation was present. There is power in corporate prayer. The congregational prayer meeting is the “powerhouse” of the church, as they call it in Scotland. And I don’t mean prayer for so and so’s chest cold. There is plenty of that kind of prayer going on. I mean deep, extended wrestling with God for the outpouring of the spirit of power. We lack the power of God, our ministries are tame and uneventful, and we lack true revival because we do not pray together, continuously, for revival. What would happen if we, as a congregation, were “continually devoting” ourselves to prayer for ten days, just ten days? I won’t ask, because we won’t do it. We won’t commit to one day of prayer. No, we strain to get two percent out for one hour of prayer once a quarter.

Why should God take us seriously if we will not follow the pattern of the early church? Preaching, worship, the sacraments, and prayer were characteristic of the apostolic church and the key to its success. Why should He think that we want true revival if we will gather for desserts, for parties, for picnics, for nearly any excuse to get together, but neglect the essentials? The apostles fed the people the Word and sacraments and prayed down the Spirit. This will never happen among us unless there are fundamental changes in our outlook. Most American Christians are practical atheists, or at least deists. We believe in a God who wound up the world and has not been heard from since and will not be heard from. So, what is the use of prayer? We have no concept of the potential of our prayers because our God can't do anything. Do you want revival? Do you really? Then let us begin to be committed, from the leadership on down, to belief in a God who hears and acts when called upon. Let us begin to call upon Him in congregational prayer. We need to begin to think *big*, in terms of God's power to save and the possibility of tens of thousands of people turning to Christ in our area, the churches being jammed full of people. Only prayer can bring this about. Only a people who believe this are likely to pray.

4. The early church was committed to fellowship. Finally, in Acts 2:42 we read of "fellowship," *koinonia*, a word which indicates mutual "sharing" or "participation" together. They were not just committed to "ministry," but also to one another. The proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost resulted in the creation of a fellowship of 3000! A diversity of people was thrown together as a result. Now what? How are they to get along? By being committed to one another, by "continually devoting themselves to . . . fellowship."

Let us just state the obvious. This was not a perfect church made up of sinless angels. It was a large church with a large number of officers (12 apostles plus elders), and a large number of new members. Plus, there were people joining all the time, even daily (v. 47). Any time you throw people together like that there will be trouble. They did have trouble, as evidenced by the dispute in Acts 6. Nevertheless, we read of their common life:

And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Acts 2:44,45)

These verses have been looked at in a variety of ways. They “had all things in common.” Is this an attempt at communal living? Perhaps, but it seems to be no more than a very generous pooling of resources for the sake of those who “might have need” (v. 45). It was not done, it would seem, for the purpose of fulfilling an ideal of common ownership, but rather to meet the needs of those who were poor. Common ownership was never mandated. For example, Barnabas’ gift of the value of the land which he sold is treated as though it were unusual (4:35,36). Also, Ananias’ deceptive gift was a gift of his own property which he had the option of keeping.

While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God. (Acts 5:4)

What they did was not commanded and was never repeated anywhere else the church went. The case really cannot be made, as some have tried, that the elimination of private property and

possessions is portrayed. Neither is this presented as an ideal state to which the church ought to strive. Matthew Henry cites the comment of Baxter with approval, that their aim was not to destroy property, but selfishness.

Having said that, let us not miss the point that this is an example of profound generosity and charity. The people were setting loose to their worldly possessions. They were sharing “as anyone might have need.” “My things” were no longer just mine. They were to be shared with others. “All that I have,” they were saying, “is available for the use of those who have need.” This was the customary practice. The Spirit produced a spirit of generosity.

One can talk commitment all day long but the proof is always when it begins to cost something. When I was a young, pastoral intern, I shared a small apartment with two other interns. Regularly, a kind member of the church would bake cookies for us. But we didn’t have a car. One day one of the fellows said, “I’m waiting for some *real* fellowship in the body of Christ. Enough of these cookies and cakes. When is someone going to give us a car?” He was joking only in part. The measure of devotion of the early church members to one another is that they were willing to give up their money and possessions for the sake of their Christian brothers and sisters.

Think of the all-too-typical church scene. A few hundred people file into church, sit for an hour staring at the back of the head of those directly in front of them, and file out at the end of the service. They don’t even know who they sat by. The extent of their involvement with others is to have stared at the back of three different heads; one on the way in, one while sitting, and one while exiting. We find by way of contrast, in Acts, a profound

commitment on the part of the believers to fellow-believers. We're calling this "sharing," but, by that, we don't mean whispering one's spiritual needs to an individual or a small group but showing material generosity. The Bible is wonderfully non-spiritual at various points, and this is one of them. They "shared" hard, cold cash. And they sold their land and houses, when necessary, in order to raise it. Three types of fellowship/sharing are highlighted in Acts 2 and again in Acts 4.

First, **they gave regularly for the purpose of meeting on-going needs**. This is what we understand by v. 32b:

. . . and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them. (Acts 4:32b)

They didn't claim or demand the exclusive use of their own property but considered their things as "common property," as we've seen already.

Second, **they gave sacrificially for the meeting of exceptional needs**. The characteristic attitude toward personal belongings finds expression in exceptional giving in 4:34 and in the example in 4:36,37.

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need. (Acts 4:34,35)

This is radical generosity, to say the least. Can you imagine a member of the church selling his house or land in order to help a struggling family? We would think he had flipped. Can you imagine the talk? “So and so just sold his house in order to help the Jones! What has gotten into him? He has really taken this religion thing too far!” Yet, they did it. We may return now to Barnabas. He is an example of extraordinary sacrificial giving.

*And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.
(Acts 4:36,37)*

When do people do such things? When they care about people and they care about the church. The Spirit produces compassion toward those in need. One gets to the place where one cannot say no to a need.

I have been blessed in the last three and a half years to have seen examples of giving like I have never seen before. I have seen one individual quietly give away tens of thousands of dollars to financially needy people. I have shaken my head in amazement and unbelief. I have seen others take strangers into their homes and care for them for weeks and months and, in one case, for years. This is risky business. It is costly. But this is what the Spirit does to a people. How can one say “no” to a handicapped child or a destitute family? I know how I could. I would just say, “No.” This is why I so admire those who give, and why I, and I’m sure, most of you with me, feel some measure of shame at their example. I know that shame is what prompts some people to speak cynically and derogatorily about radical examples like these. They shame

our own hard-heartedness. Our only defense is to con ourselves into thinking that they have lost their minds, while we continue to do the sensible thing . . . and cling to our possessions.

Why do we find giving so difficult? We are not only the most materially prosperous people in the history of the world, we are also the most materially obsessive. We love money and the things money gives us - comfort, pleasure, and prestige. A materialistic people live as though this world is all there is. Heaven is now. You only live once (a lie). Work hard, play hard, and at 65 go to secular society's version of eternity - retirement. We just can't part with our things. We must have them and preserve them.

But, it is more than love for people that motivates radical giving. It is, fundamentally, love for Christ and His cause. So Acts 4:33 includes in its account of radical giving the statement, "The apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33). Perhaps the choice of the word "witness" (*marturion*), rather than "speak" or "proclaim," indicates that both words and works were testimonies of Christ's resurrection in the sense that Jesus meant it when he said that His works bore witness of Him (John 5:36; 10:25). Even if this was not Luke's intent, still we know that it was for Christ's sake and His church's sake that they did these things.

It isn't just money that is given. When people really believe the gospel and really believe in the mission of the church, they will do anything to promote the ministry of the church. When I was in high school, there was one particular individual who was responsible for about 90% of the people who attended our youth group. He saw the value of it, and so he promoted it with great zeal. He took responsibility. In college, the same was the case with regard to a campus Bible study. One person organized the

calendar, got the teacher, sent out fliers, paid for all the expenses, set up the chairs, reserved the room, and did just about everything else. Why? Because he saw the value of it.

This is what makes the church go. Do you believe in what the church is proclaiming and doing? Then take responsibility for it. Church is not just a place you go when you can, it is a place to which you bring unsaved friends week by week. Do you believe in the ministry of this church? Then help in the nursery. Teach Sunday School. Work with the youth. Visit the elderly. Give toward the renovation and upkeep of its facilities. Give toward world missions. Give to the budget of the church. If you don't believe in it, find a church whose ministry you do believe in. But, each one of us must take responsibility. It is up to you. There are people who need to hear the gospel and who will not if you don't invite them. There are people who are languishing in their Christian lives who would thrive in a Bible teaching church but who will not ever come if you don't invite them. There is ministry that will not take place if you don't financially support it. And, there is ministry that will not take place if you yourself don't do it, lending a helping hand, selling homes and lands if need be, in order to show mercy.

The single, most discouraging thing for me in the ministry is the pettiness which characterizes so much of what goes on in the church. When we have out of town guests visiting our home I will usually ask how their home church is doing. Invariably, one will hear of generally good things followed by a whole string of silly interpersonal gripes. It is enough to make one ill. So and so is angry with so and so. He didn't speak to him because she was overlooked and got no recognition. Blah, blah, blah. Then, there are people who quit coming to services. Others switch churches.

Others quit speaking. If this had been characteristic of the Jerusalem church, it would have never spread beyond the city limits.

Devotion to the fellowship of the church means devotion to silly people and a lot of foolishness. Why is this so? Because the church is made up of sinners, that's why. Inevitably, we will hurt and disappoint one another. If, each time that happens you run for it, the church will collapse. We are called to be committed to the fellowship.

Now, I have painted a bleak picture of life in the church only because whenever our commitment declines we always think we are justified. We always have a perfectly justified rationale for backing off, delineated in terms of this or that disappointment and hurt. The point is that we are called to commitment to the church, the real church, and the real church is corrupted by people like you and me.

Third, **they shared hospitality with one another.**

*And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple,
and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking
their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.
(Acts 2:46)*

Why were they characterized by “gladness and sincerity of heart?” Because when they were committed to Christ and one another, the Lord blessed them and added joy to their fellowship. They were involved in each other's lives. They were “breaking bread from house to house,” i.e., they were in each other's homes having meals together. I know that this can be overdone, but it can also be

underdone. Do you have people into your home? I don't mean to "entertain." If I might make a distinction, there is a difference between entertaining and hospitality. "Entertaining" is done when it is convenient, when you can get the house ready, bring out the china and silver, and cook a fancy meal. Too often it is done for personal glory. Hospitality is shown as needs arise, whatever the condition of the house and quality of the meal. It is shown for Christ's sake and for the benefit of others.

Are you committed to the people of this church? Do you seek their fellowship? Do you desire to work with and for them? Lone Ranger Christianity is unbiblical. God calls us into fellowship with sinners. We need it. We must have it. Solitary Christians rarely remain solitary; they either find fellowship, or they give up Christianity.

So, the fourth mark of the apostolic ministry is devotion to fellowship, to mutual care, support, and participation in the work of the gospel. "O how they love one another." This is what the ancient world said of the early church. These people took care of the widows and orphans (Acts 6). The hard, loveless world of antiquity noticed a difference, and so will ours. Our contemporaries are "men without chests," as C.S. Lewis' powerful image describes them. Christian fellowship is what the world needs. It gropes for it in bars and social organizations. But it can only be found in Christianity. Yet, they will only realize it if we model genuine fellowship for them.

We'll conclude this section with an observation. I sometimes am asked, "What are you going to do for _____ group?" You fill in the blank. What are we doing for the children, the youth, the young couples, the singles, the divorced, the retired, the elderly,

etc.? Typically, the answer out there in churchland is, “We’ll start a meeting” for this or that group. Before long, dozens of groups are in operation and the calendar of the church is more complex than an Olympic schedule of events. My short answer to the question is, “Nothing.” We’ll do nothing outside of what we are doing already. The implication of the multiplying of groups and meetings is not one that I am ready to accept, that somehow the ordinary means of grace are not sufficient for the extraordinary problems and circumstances of the people in these groups who, by the time you add them all up, equals everybody! If you want to find the grace to handle divorce, singleness, marriedness, or whatever you confront in life, come to church Sunday morning and night, hear the word preached, receive the sacraments, pray for help, and enjoy the fellowship! Your problems are not extraordinary (1 Corinthians 10:13). By these simple means the ministry of the church thrives, and you will receive all that you need to grow in grace.

The Power & Gifts of the Holy Spirit - How Did They Do It?

Now it remains for us to describe the dynamic that made it all happen. The need of the power of the Spirit is made evident from the very beginning in Acts. How so? Jesus spent three years with His disciples, pouring His life into them, instructing them in the Scriptures and preparing them for the ministry that they would have. Following the resurrection, He spent an additional 40 days with them. On the day in which He ascended into heaven He told them, “You are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). For ten days they were required to wait. This is fascinating to me. Why not go out immediately and preach? Hadn’t they been discipled by the Master Himself? Were they not trained? Were they not ready? Though they may have had all the knowledge and experience that they needed, a critical element was missing. This element was so crucial that they had to

ignore the needs of lost souls all around them for ten days! What was missing? The power of the Holy Spirit. Their witness and speech would be futile without the power of the Spirit. Jesus made them cool their heels for ten days in order to make an epochal point. The church cannot rely on theology, though it must have sound doctrine. It cannot rely on right government, though proper order is important. The church must have not just the ministry forms and priorities but power as well. What do we mean by power?

1. Negatively, we don't mean the external phenomena which accompanied the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. The disciples in the Upper Room experienced:

1. The sound of the wind;
2. The appearance of tongues of fire;
3. The ability to speak languages they had not learned.

All three of these external phenomena seem to us to be unique to the original Pentecost and are not to be regarded as normative for the ongoing life of the church. The sound of wind and the tongues of fire are never mentioned again in Scripture. The gift of languages or "tongues" is, but do the subsequent occurrences indicate that this is something for us today? Let's look at the issues.

The Pentecostal and Charismatic argument is that what we see in Acts 2 is not just meant for the apostolic band but for all Christians in all ages. They maintain that what we see in Acts 2 is a second work of grace, a "baptism of the Holy Spirit." The apostles were already believers; their subsequent experience at Pentecost was a deeper experience of the Spirit which God intends for all

Christians. These two stages in Christian experience are, in their view, the “full gospel,” and superior to the truncated gospel for which most Christians settle. The first work is conversion, when one becomes a Christian. The second work, the “filling” or “baptism,” is accompanied, as at Pentecost, by the gift of speaking in tongues, when one takes a leap forward in one’s Christian experience.

What is wrong with this position? It fails to see the uniqueness of Pentecost. Are we to believe that there is nothing unique happening at Pentecost, nothing which is once-for-all? I do not believe that this argument can be consistently maintained; moreover, it involves an inaccurate, and sometimes arbitrary, handling of Scripture. Let me show you what I mean.

First, it fails to deal consistently with the **external phenomena** accompanying the filling of the Spirit at Pentecost. Regarding Acts 2:1-4, why are not all the items found there thought to be normative? Do Pentecostals and Charismatics really believe that the apostle’s experience should at every point be our experience? If so, should not every Christian hear “a noise like a violent, rushing wind” when he is converted or when he is “filled with the Spirit?” Should we not expect that each Christian will see “tongues of fire?” Of course, this is not taught. There is no one who maintains that one should see and hear these external manifestations of the Spirit. They’re not present again in the rest of Acts. In fact, they’re not even present in the rest of the second chapter. The 3000 converted by Peter’s Pentecost sermon were promised “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38), “received his word” and were “baptized,” but no mention is made of any of the external signs - wind, fire, or tongues. My question is, why not? Is it not arbitrary to say that the gift of “tongues” should continue and the sound of wind and sight

of tongues of fire should not? If they will not say this, then we all, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal alike, recognize that some of what we see at Pentecost is epochal, once-for-all and unique.

Second, it fails to understand the Biblical meaning of the “**baptism of the Spirit**” and the meaning of the **two stages** (if it is such) of the apostles’ experience. Can it be biblically shown that the early church understood the “baptism of the Spirit” to be a second-stage experience of grace accompanied by the gift of tongues? No, the “baptism” of the Spirit is not an experience subsequent to conversion at all but is a part of conversion itself. Aside from John’s and Jesus’ promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5), and the apostles’ remembrance of that promise (Acts 11:16), the work of the Holy Spirit is not called a “baptism.” Exactly what Jesus meant by “baptism” is unclear, except as we may infer from other passages. The only other reference to the “baptism of the Spirit” is in 1 Corinthians 12:13 where Paul says,

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Here, the “baptism” is clarified; it could only refer to the Christian’s original reception of the Spirit at conversion since it is an event which “we were all” made to experience. We are further helped to understand what the phrase “baptism of the Spirit” refers to by the account of Cornelius’ conversion. Peter identifies it as the “baptism” (11:16), yet we also read that the Spirit “fell upon” him (10:44, cf. 8:16, 11:15), was “poured out upon” him (10:45; cf. 2:17,18,33) and “received” by Cornelius (10:47; cf. 2:38; 8:15,17,19; 19:2). This is the language of conversion. At

conversion Cornelius “received” and was “baptized” by the Spirit. The language of “baptism” refers, then, to the initial reception of the Spirit.

Similarly, the other seemingly two-stage conversion/reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8,10, and 19) should also be seen as either (1) extensions of the one Pentecost (see point 3 below) or, (2) as with Cornelius, the point at which conversion actually occurs (Acts 8 and 19). The baptism of the Spirit occurs when a person comes to personal faith and repentance. All Christians have been baptized by the Spirit.

Let’s imagine that you remain unconvinced. You think that the Apostles experience of grace was in two stages: conversion followed by Spirit baptism. If we were to grant you this point (which, of course, we don’t), it would still not indicate that their experience is meant to serve as a model of our own. Even if the apostles’ experience was in two stages (conversion followed by reception of the Spirit), that need to be any more normative than Adam’s creation out of dust. One may not argue that the only true humans are those created as Adam was created. To do so would be to miss his uniqueness as the inaugural man. So, too, with Pentecost. If there were two stages in their Christian experience, and Pentecost is not their conversion, this is only because they were the inaugural Christians. Reformed theologians have argued that the Pentecost “baptism” belongs to the *historia salutis*, or history of salvation, not to the *ordo salutis*, the ongoing continual application, or experience, of salvation. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., in *Perspectives on Pentecost*, argues that,

The baptism with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a unique event of epochal significance in the history of redemption.

Therefore it is no more capable of being repeated or serving as a model for individual Christian experience than are the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, with which it is so integrally conjoined as part of a single complex of events (22).

Third, it fails to understand **the character and function of “tongues.”** As to **character**, what are tongues? Luke spends six verses of Acts 2 laboring the point that the disciples spoke languages. He goes to the trouble to list fifteen of them! “Tongues,” in Acts, is known human languages. It is not ecstatic speech or “free vocalization,” as the linguists call it. Neither is the miracle a miracle of hearing. The rather emphatic point is that a gift of speech, not of hearing, was given and the gift belonged to the apostolic band, not the crowd. It seems to me to be illegitimate to take a Biblical phenomena of language and apply it to a contemporary phenomenon of non-language. Considerable linguistic study has been done of the phenomenon of modern “tongues,” and even a sympathetic observer, Vern Poythress of Westminster Seminary, says of this “significant body of professional linguistic, psychological and sociological analysis” that there are no documented cases of a tongues speaker speaking in a previously unknown, identifiable human language. Moreover, free vocalization occurs among some non-Western religions and among cults, such as Mormons. This is not a concern to Poythress, “since free vocalization is so easy to produce,” and is a learned behavior (Vern S. Poythress, “Linguistic and Sociological Analysis of Modern Tongues-Speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XLII, Spring 1980, No. 2, pp. 367-388). But should free vocalization be identified with the gift of tongues found in Acts? I think not. The fact is that the gift of languages in Acts 2 knows no parallel in the

history of the church and, like the sound of the wind and the appearance of fire, must be regarded as unique in the history of redemption, irrepeatable, and not to be considered a norm for our day. Even if one wished to build a case for ecstatic speech as normative, one cannot do so for unlearned human languages. This phenomena has not been, and is not today, a part of the regular life of any church.

As to the purpose or **function** of tongues, I refer us back to Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:20-22:

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to me," says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.

Paul says that, "strange tongues" were meant to be a "sign" to unbelieving Israel. They were given to demonstrate in a tangible, visible way that the Spirit had, indeed, come upon the church. Who needed this proof? Israel did, as a sign of the new covenant and as a warning of judgment. It was a sign to unbelieving Jews, even Christian Jews, of the nature of the new covenant, particularly the inclusion of the Gentiles and the transfer of the kingdom to the Church. But once having done so, God no longer continues to prove that point. The external signs have to do with the history of redemption, and not one's personal experience of redemption. They were given as signs only for a particular moment in history.

This reasoning seems to make sense of what Paul says to the Corinthian church about their “tongues” which, admittedly, seem to be more like the modern phenomenon than the tongues of Acts. While not forbidding tongues and showing pastoral care and gentleness throughout his discussion, he clearly discourages the use of “free vocalization,” disparaging that which is uninterpreted, fails to impart knowledge (vv. 4-6), fails to make a “distinction in the tones” (v. 7), fails to engage the mind (v. 15), and preferring five words spoken “with my mind that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19). Their use of tongues in the worship service and, perhaps, in private, he says, is to be as “children in your thinking” and not understand the purpose of tongues, the real tongues (as in Acts 2), which are a sign to the unbelieving of impending judgment.

Does his admonition make sense of the other occasions of tongue-speaking in Acts? I believe it does. On each occasion, the gift is given in order to demonstrate to Jews that questionable groups did, indeed, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Packer writes,

Luke records four cases of “pentecostal” manifestations - one involving Jesus’ disciples (Acts 2:1-4), one involving Samaritans (8:14-17), one involving Gentile “God-fearers” (10:44,47) and one involving Ephesian followers of John the Baptist (19:1-7). The design of Acts makes it natural to think that he does this to exhibit God’s acceptance on equal footing in the church of four different groups whose togetherness in Christ might otherwise have been doubted (“Piety on Fire,” *Christianity Today*, May 12, 1989, p. 23).

God, apparently, delayed the receiving of the Holy Spirit by the Samaritans until Peter and John were present, as authoritative agents of the church, to verify for the whole church that the Samaritans, too, were recipients of the gift of the Spirit. They had

“received the word of God,” but only when the apostles prayed and laid hands upon them did they receive the Spirit (8:14,17).

The Gentiles also had their vindicating Pentecost:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them and speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:44-47)

Three more times Peter will emphasize the point, the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit “just as we did.” He relates to the Judean brethren who “took issue with him” for eating with Gentiles,

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. (Acts 11:15)

And again,

If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way? (Acts 11:17)

And again at the counsel of Jerusalem,

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us. (Acts 15:8)

The gift of tongues was a sign that the Samaritans and Gentiles had received the same spirit in the same proportion as had the Jews. The same may be said of the disciples of John in Acts 19:1-6. The point is, none of this may be used as evidence that it was the norm for the early Christians to receive the gift of tongues when they were “baptized” with the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Paul asks, “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” (1 Corinthians 12:30). There is no mention of tongues at Damascus, at Antioch, Ephesus, Phillipi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, or Rome. Packer goes on to say,

Nothing suggests that his purpose is to establish norms of complete Christian experience for all; the impression left, rather, is that these manifestations were exceptional signs from God, not matched in the experience of other believers. Certainly, the burden of proof rests on anyone who would argue the contrary (23).

2. Positively, we do mean the internal, heart-changing, power-giving work of the Holy Spirit.

So far, we have seen what we ought to regard as unique to the apostles and not a pattern for their spiritual descendants. Particularly, we have regarded as such,

1. The sound of the wind;
2. The appearance of tongues of fire;
3. The gift of languages;
4. The two stages of conversion and “spirit-baptism.”

What, then, is normative, meant to serve as examples of what should be experienced in every Christian life?

First, the **indwelling** of the Holy Spirit. This is the point of Luke’s description of tongues of fire resting “on each one of them,” of

them “all” being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” and Joel’s interpretation, “I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind,” both sons and daughters, old and young, slave and free (2:3,4,17,18). All Christians are baptized, by which we mean “indwelt” by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). And they don’t come to be such by attending special meetings and seeking the “baptism,” something we are never once encouraged to do. What we are encouraged to do is seek Christ by faith and, as we do, the Holy Spirit is given to us. Peter says as much in v. 38: Repent, be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ . . . and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” We receive the Spirit when we trust Christ, not at some subsequent event. Paul reminds the Galatians of the origins of their experience of the Spirit, tracing it to the time they came to faith,

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:2)

J.D.G. Dunn concludes his scholarly study, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, saying that for the early church the distinctive mark of the Christian was not morality, godliness, or even discipleship. It was possession of the Spirit; “for it is God’s giving of the Spirit which makes a man a Christian, and, in the last analysis, nothing else” (68).

What is a Christian? What is the distinguishing hallmark of the Christian? . . . That man is a Christian who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit by committing himself to the risen Jesus as Lord, and who lives accordingly (229).

Paul says,

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (Romans 8:9)

Are you indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Have you received Christ by faith? Has He given to you the gift of the Holy Spirit? This is the necessary mark of the genuine Christian.

Second, the **filling** of the Holy Spirit. The consequence of the outpouring of Pentecost was that the apostolic band were “all filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4). What does this mean? It may be referring merely to the initial filling of the Spirit, by which one is indwelt. But in Biblical usage the *indwelling* of the Spirit is a constant, unchanging reality for the child of God, whereas the “filling” of the Spirit ebbs and flows. It refers, rather, to two things: the control of the Spirit and the empowering of the Spirit. The second category we will look at under the next heading.

The “filling” of the Spirit, meaning the control and influence of the Spirit, is a reality over which we have a great deal of control. As such, it may be a fluctuating experience, though it by no means must be. The norm for the Christian is to be “filled with the Spirit,” and so we are commanded to be such by the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 5:18). It was said of the deacon candidates of the Jerusalem church that they must be “full of the Spirit” (Acts 6:3), and of Barnabas, that “he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). These are descriptions of the characteristic condition of the Christian lives of these men. They were under the control, influence, and direction of the Spirit. Of the disciples at Iconium, in the aftermath of persecution in Pisidian Antioch, we read,

And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:52)

We learn from Pentecost that the disciples of Christ are filled with the Spirit, and we also are to be filled with the Spirit. He is to be our controlling influence. He is to be the captain of our ship, the driver of our car. He is to be our peace in the midst of conflict, our joy in the midst of sorrow, our strength in the midst of weakness.

This is not the case for so many. So many are defeated in their Christian lives. They have no peace. They have no joy. They continually fall into sin. They are spiritual failures. Why? Because peace and joy and self-control are the “fruit” (Galatians 5:18ff) of the Holy Spirit. It is His fullness which produces these things, and that is something we must seek. We must submit ourselves to the control and influence of God’s Spirit. How? By all the normal means. By spending time broken before Him in prayer, by reading His word, by attending worship. We are commanded to be filled. Ask daily, that the Lord would so fill you with His Spirit.

Third, the **anointing** of the Holy Spirit. “Filling,” at times, also seems to indicate a special “anointing,” or provision, or empowering for a special task. We may think of this in two ways. First, the Spirit gives gifts to His church, and every Christian has received spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:11ff; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12). Paul says,

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Second, to the regular functioning gifts there may be added special anointings in times of special need, as in the case of revival. There are seasons when God especially empowers or equips one to perform specific tasks, tasks for which, perhaps, one had no special

ability before. So we see Peter, already “filled” for his first sermon (2:4), again, in the face of a challenge by the rulers and elders in Jerusalem, anointed for his second sermon.

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them,
“Rulers and elders of the people . . .” (Acts 4:8)*

After further threats, we read of the whole congregation,

*And when they had prayed, the place where they had
gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with
the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with
boldness. (Acts 4:31)*

The filling empowers them to speak with “boldness.”

Paul is empowered to rise to the challenge of Elymas the magician,

*But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy
Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him. (Acts 13:9)*

Thus, we may say that all of the Holy Spirit that a person gets is not given at conversion. Of course, we do not chop up or quantify the third person of the Trinity. But as experienced, we do receive more or less of His power. At this point, we come close to the Pentecostals and Charismatics. We look for and believe in revival, when God comes in power. We look, not exactly for a “second blessing,” but a third and fourth and fiftieth blessing.

What are we to continue to look for from the Holy Spirit in the aftermath of Pentecost? Not the external signs but the internal reality of His indwelling presence, His filling control, and His anointing power. This is what will make the difference in our day, even as it did in the 1st Century. The ordinary, controlling

influence of the Holy Spirit is a great need in our day because it, and it alone, will banish all the silly and tragic carnality which has come to characterize our churches. We will only live an attractive holiness when we are filled with His Spirit.

Beyond that, we need His provision of gifts, gifted individuals in leadership, and the whole plethora of gifts that He gives to His church. It is almost unimaginable what the church could do if every member were exercising his gift.

But beyond that, we need the special anointings and provision that God gives, that empowers the ministry of the church with a supernatural power. Only the Spirit can convert a sinner. Only He can change a heart. We need revival power. We need a great outpouring of the Spirit as at Pentecost, not so 120 of us will speak in tongues, but so 3000 of our fellow citizens will call out, "What shall we do?", and will repent and be saved. This is the lesson of Pentecost today. The lesson is that of our total dependence upon the Holy Spirit for both the ordinary and the extraordinary. Come, Holy Spirit. Come, enable, empower, anoint, convict, revive!

Here then is our picture of the apostolic ideal. It involves right forms, those of government and discipline. It involves right ministry, the priorities of word, sacrament, prayer, and sacrificial love. But animating it all, bringing life and energy to it all, is the power of the Holy Spirit. He must breathe life into the forms. He must manifest power through His word. We will see a new Pentecost when we are doing things right, and He is empowering those right things by His Spirit.

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